



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

REMARKS OF MR. NORTON

AT THE

ANNUAL MEETING OF THE DANTE SOCIETY,
MAY 16, 1882.

WHILE the members of the Dante Society share in the common sorrow for the death of Mr. Longfellow, they feel a deep sense of peculiar and personal loss. For Mr. Longfellow was not only the most eminent of the students of Dante in America, but, as the President of this Society, he had from the first taken a cordial interest in its work, and rendered to it the most efficient aid. He had accepted the office of President upon condition that no duties should be connected with it, for already when the Society was formed his years were many and his health uncertain. But he filled the office as if he had made no such condition.

The copy of the manuscript in the Laurentian library of the Comment on the Inferno by Benvenuto da Imola, which is in our hands to-night, is not so much the memorial of a frustrated project of the Society,

as of Mr. Longfellow's liberal and zealous promotion of its interests. Desirous that the Society should perform a work of essential benefit to the students of the Divine Comedy, he undertook to bear the whole cost of the transcript of Benvenuto's Comment, in the hope that the editing and publication of it might be effected by the Society. When Lord Vernon's intention of publishing the work, in fulfilment of the design of his late father, became known, the first part of the transcript was already well advanced. It seemed needless to go on with our project, but, at Mr. Longfellow's desire, the copy of the Comment on the Inferno was completed, and it will remain henceforth in our library, prized by ourselves and our successors as the permanent record of Mr. Longfellow's connection with our Society and concern in its work.

Mr. Longfellow's interest in Dante began early, but his serious study of him dates from his stay in Rome in 1827, in his account of which in "Outre Mer" he says that "poring over the gloomy pages of Dante, or 'Bandello's laughing tale,' I protract my nightly vigil till the morning star is in the sky." He soon learned that not all the pages of Dante are gloomy.

I do not know when the translations of those passages from the Purgatorio were made, or whether they had previously been printed, which appeared in 1839 in the little volume of "Voices of the Night,"

the corner stone of his poetic fame. One is "The Celestial Pilot," from the second canto; another, "The Terrestrial Paradise," from the twenty-eighth canto; and the third is "Beatrice," from the thirtieth and thirty-first cantos. These translations are of interest in many respects, but especially as showing that Mr. Longfellow had already adopted the principle of literal, verse for verse, unrhymed translation, which he adhered to when he undertook the task of translating the whole of the *Divine Comedy*. The versions are of great beauty, and are embodied with little change in the complete work. But it is well worth while to compare the passages as they stand in the *Voices of the Night*, and in their place in the translation of the *Divine Comedy*, in order to note the later revision which the poet gave to them, and to mark the signs it affords of increased simplicity, literalness, and perfected art. The comparison is an instructive study of the refinement of poetic expression. The last touch, the hardest part of the artist's task according to the proverb of the Greek sculptor, perfects the work.

These specimens of his unrivalled skill and felicity as a translator, led some of Mr. Longfellow's friends to urge him in succeeding years to render into English more passages of the poem, if not the whole of it. His taste led him to the work. In a letter written in March, 1843, he says: "How different from this gossip

is the Divine Dante with which I begin the morning ! I write a few lines every day before breakfast. It is the first thing I do, — the morning prayer, — the key-note of the day. I am delighted to have you take an interest in it. But do not expect too much, for I really have but a few moments to devote to it daily ; yet daily a stone, small or great, is laid on the pile." But other interests and occupations shortly interfered to prevent him from completing the task.

Years passed on, and, though Dante was never long absent from his hand, he did not resume the translation. I have a note from him, written in 1859, in which he says : —

"Long, long ago I planned a book to be called 'An Introduction to the Study of Dante.' It was to contain a translation of

1. Boccaccio's Life.
2. The Vita Nuova.
3. The Letter of Fra Hilario.
4. The Vision of Frate Alberico.
5. Schelling on the 'Divina Commedia.'
6. Anecdotes, etc. from the Novellieri.
7. The best things said upon Dante by Carlyle, Macaulay, and others, — etc., etc.

"Now I make it all over to you, if you will undertake it. Will you?

"How the birds twitter and sing this *bellissima giornata di primavera !*"

But this and the greater task circumstances were after all to bring him to accomplish.

In 1863, when he was experiencing a deeper need than at any other period of his life of occupation that should be of a nature congenial with his mood, and which should at least give him tranquil and regular employment, he was led, partly by his own impulse, partly by friendly urgency, to resume the work long laid aside, and to engage in the restorative labor of translating the whole of the *Divine Comedy*. The work was steadily pursued, and with increasing interest. In the course of the year the greater part of the *Inferno* was finished. The sixth centenary of Dante's birth was approaching. Florence was about to celebrate the anniversary with unusual observances. She invited the lovers of her poet, wherever they might be, to unite with her in doing honor to his memory. Mr. Longfellow determined to send his translation to her as a tribute from America. But master as he was of his own language and of that of Dante, and thorough as was his knowledge of the substance and significance of the poem, he was too modest to rely wholly upon his own judgment and genius in the performance of his work, and he called upon two of his friends to sit with him in the final revision of it.

In 1863, the manuscript was put in the printers'

hands, and every Wednesday evening Mr. Lowell and I met in Mr. Longfellow's study to listen while he read a canto of his translation from the proof-sheet. We paused over every doubtful passage, discussed the various readings, considered the true meaning of obscure words and phrases, sought for the most exact equivalent of Dante's expression, objected, criticised, praised, with a freedom that was made perfect by Mr. Longfellow's absolute sweetness, simplicity, and modesty, and by the entire confidence that existed between us. Witte's text was always before us, and of the early commentators Buti was the one to whom we had most frequent and most serviceable recourse. They were delightful evenings; there could be no pleasanter occupation; the spirits of poetry, of learning, of friendship, were with us. Now and then some other friend or acquaintance would join us for the hours of study. Almost always one or two guests would come in at ten o'clock, when the work ended, and sit down with us to a supper, with which the evening closed. Mr. Longfellow had a special charm as a host, the charm of social grace and humor, by which his guests were brought into congenial disposition. His delicate and refined taste, his cheerful enjoyment of good things, showed themselves in the arrangement and order of the table, no less than in the talk that went on round about it. He was in truth

"A man of such a genial mood
 The heart of all things he embraced,
 And yet of such fastidious taste
 He never found the best too good."

Ten copies of the translation of the *Inferno* in a form worthy of their destination were struck off, of which five were sent to Florence in season for the festival in May, 1865. I have one of them with the date of the day on which the completed volume came to the poet's hand, February 27, 1865, his own fifty-eighth birthday. These copies had a special dedication:—

"IN COMMEMORAZIONE
 DEL
 SECENTESIMO ANNIVERSARIO DELLA NASCITA
 DI
 DANTE ALIGHIERI."

During the two following years the translation and the revision of the *Purgatorio* and the *Paradiso* were carried on in the same manner as the *Inferno* had been. There were intervals, indeed, in which the Wednesday evening meetings were omitted, owing to natural interruptions in the progress of the work; but these were few and comparatively brief. The memory of those evenings is renewed by the printed volumes when I take them from the shelves. The verses recall the questions they suggested, the debates to which they led. The scene revives, and I hear the voices of the poets

“Ch’ esser mi fecer della loro schiera,
Si ch’ io fui terzo tra cotanto senno.”

The three volumes of the translation, with its abundant and unequalled commentary, were published in the spring of 1867. My copy bears the date of May 1st,—a date appropriate, for May is Dante’s month.

There is no need to speak of the character of Mr. Longfellow’s translation. Its excellence is admitted by all competent critics. Though his work was complete, our Dante evenings did not come to an end. We continued for a time to meet once a week, but now in my study, to revise in the same manner my version of “The New Life.”

During subsequent years Mr. Longfellow still kept up his interest in Dantesque studies. He frequently used to propose the renewal of our Dantean meetings, urging me to translate the *Convito*, that it might form the subject of our discourse. I engaged to do the prose, if he would pledge himself to doing the difficult *Canzoni*. He smiled, and postponed the task.

During this last winter, the last gift he made me was a copy of a pamphlet on Dante that had interested him,—and since this year came in he had proposed that before long, perhaps when Lowell should come home, we should all look over his version once

more, and see what emendations might be made in it and in the comment.

But this was not to be.

The gratitude of our Society is due to him, both for the work he did in promoting the love and knowledge of the poet of whom we profess ourselves the students, and for his consenting to act as our President. His memory will be cherished in our Society with especial honor. In our Dante Library his bust shall stand opposite that of his and our Master.